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FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/10/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN ELECTION 2008: ALL QUIET ON THE
SUMQAYIT FRONT

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor Rob Garverick, for reasons
1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a trip to Sumqayit to gauge the pre-election environment, the head of the local Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) told the Embassy that YAP has been at the forefront of grassroots campaigning. The official believes President Aliyev will win by 85-90 percent, with 65-75 percent of the electorate voting. Staff working for Umid (Hope) Chair Igbal Agazade's campaign complained about election-related abuses, while struggling to articulate Agazade's platform. Agazade's staff and local civil society activists alleged YAP and local officials are using several tactics to get out the vote for President Aliyev because voter turnout will be below 30 percent if administrative resources are not employed to boost election-day turnout. Voter apathy and the asymmetry between President Aliyev and the other candidates appear to be the key trends in this election. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy officer conducted meetings in Sumqayit on October 9 to gauge pre-election conditions. Sumqayit is Azerbaijan's third largest city after Baku and Ganja, with a population of approximately 350,000. Sumqayit could be considered a suburb of Baku, however, as it is only about 20 miles from Baku. Sumqayit probably is best known as a Soviet-era industrial zone. The town is littered with hollowed-out factories.

YAP Chief Smells Victory

¶3. (C) The chief of the Sumqayit Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) branch, Asif Imamaliyev, told us he hopes for 65-75 percent voter participation in Sumqayit on election-day and that President Aliyev will win by 85-90 percent. Imamaliyev said approximately 4,000 of 16,000 Sumqayit-based YAP members have worked on President Aliyev's campaign. The local YAP branch has organized 15 meetings or rallies with Sumqayit residents since the campaign season opened, with approximately 300-400 attending each event. When asked about Sumqayit voters' key concerns, Imamaliyev said voters no longer have the same level of socioeconomic concerns as life increasingly is getting better for the population. Whereas the general public had widespread economic problems five years ago, now people "have to look to find problems." Imamaliyev said Sumqayit residents do not appear attracted to the other six candidates running against President Aliyev.

Umid (Hope) Party: Hope in What?

¶4. (C) Staff members working for Umid (Hope) Chair Iqbal Agazade focused their comments on alleged election abuses, they were at pains to articulate Agazade's political platform. The staffers said their election posters are placed in low-visibility areas and routinely torn down. They also said local officials are creating obstacles for meeting with voters, forcing them to meet in neighborhood courtyards. When pressed about the substance of Agazade's platform, they said Agazade's top priorities are fighting corruption and creating a multi-party system within the government. They said they have handed out 40,000 letters outlining Agazade's platform to Sumqayit residents.

¶5. (C) Agazade's staff reiterated local NGO representatives' claims that YAP and local officials are relying on unofficial measures to get out the vote for President Aliyev. Specifically, supervisors at factories, hospitals, and budgetary organizations are being pressured to recruit 10 people to vote for President Aliyev.

Civil Society: Quietest Election Ever

¶6. (C) In a roundtable with ten local civil society activists, participants suggested the general public is not interested in the election and it has shaped up to be the quietest election in Azerbaijan's post-independence history. One activist observed that Sumqayit residents are more interested in and aware of the central issues in the U.S.

presidential election than the Azerbaijan election. Several participants warned about the long-term trend being reinforced by this election: a hardening distrust and between the public and the government and a broader skepticism toward the political process.

¶7. (C) Most participants cited voter turnout as the key challenge for the GOAJ. Participants believed the maximum turnout figure in Sumqayit and throughout Azerbaijan would be 30 percent. Most participants estimated that after the election, the Central Election Commission will claim 85-90 percent voter turnout, with President Aliyev winning by 70-80 percent. Several participants alleged the remaining 20-30 percent would be distributed among the other candidates and the government would then seek to showcase one or two of these candidates as the "new opposition" to undercut the traditional opposition, which has largely boycotted the current election. Participants flagged Iqbal Agazade as the most likely candidate to be groomed as the symbol of the "new opposition." Most of the participants alleged that none of the six candidates running against Aliyev should be considered authentic opposition candidates, as they are wittingly or unwittingly being manipulated by the GOAJ.

¶8. (C) Participants said local officials are using several mechanisms to get out the vote for President Aliyev because officials are concerned about low turnout. Multiple participants said teachers, doctors, factory bosses, the heads of municipal offices, and especially military units are being pressured or paid to get at least 10 people to show up at the polls and vote for President Aliyev. Others said many soldiers are being forced to stay in their units until after the election to ensure they vote for President Aliyev. Participants also claimed local officials and the preceding categories of residents are unofficially trying to collect residents' names and identity card numbers. (NOTE: Like most post-Soviet states, Azerbaijanis are issued national identity cards. These cards are regarded as extremely important because citizens need them for conducting any routine business with local or state bureaucracies. END NOTE.) This information appeared to be collected for different reasons, but the Embassy believes the primary reasons is for teachers, doctors, factory bosses, etc. to show their superiors that they have recruited a particular number of voters for President Aliyev. Some employees at

schools, factories, and municipal offices also are reportedly being threatened with unemployment if they do not show up at the polls. One participant alleged that numbered ballots are being handed out in advance to some voters to ensure they vote for Aliyev. (NOTE: The Embassy cannot confirm or deny these allegations, but they parallel what other contacts have told us, but it is impossible to know how far these tactics are being employed.)

Comment

19. (C) Voter apathy and President Aliyev's campaign's preponderance over the other candidates appear to be the overwhelming themes of the October 15 election. The greatest potential area for election engineering is voter turnout. Absent unofficial cajoling, most commentators believe only about 20-30 percent of the electorate will show up, but GOAJ insiders -- alongside overly ambitious local officials -- probably perceive this figure is too embarrassing and will seek to pad the turnout numbers substantially.

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